EMPLOYEE OF THE QUARTER

OFFICER VICTOR CORTEZ

1st Quarter

Officer Cortez is recognized for his contributions to the Department, specifically his work as a patrol officer.

His supervisors and teammates describe him as an enthusiastic officer with a very intuitive mind for police work. Officer Cortez has emerged as a constructive member of a particular group of high preforming officers on the AM shift. He communicates effectively in his day-to-day contacts with the public, peers, and supervisors.

On February 27, 2023, Officer Cortez was monitoring the Flock Automated License Plate Reader (ALPR) system, which is something he does often. He responded to the area of a recent stolen vehicle hit and was able to locate the vehicle parked and unoccupied in the parking lot of Motel 6. Rather than simply recovering the vehicle, he led the investigation into the suspects and reviewed surveillance footage. He built a case against two unknown people which led to their arrest. Officer Cortez devoted the effort to making the arrest and stopped these criminals in their tracks.

A little over a month later, officers were involved in a pursuit with a stolen vehicle that was terminated for safety reasons. Not satisfied with losing the vehicle, Officer Cortez searched the last known area and found it parked near Cox and Blosser. It was unoccupied and he led a group of officers in gathering evidence related to the suspect and his location. Officer Cortez interviewed a security guard and viewed video surveillance directing him to a particular apartment nearby. When contacted, two of the suspects were located. Additionally, both were tied to a previous robbery in which the victim was beaten up and property was taken. Due to Officer Cortez's tenacity, and assistance from other officers, he closed two felony cases.

Officer Cortez is the type of officer the department needs to successfully apprehend criminals. Please accept my congratulations and gratitude for a job well done.

Officer Ivan Swenson

2nd Quarter

Officer Swenson's supervisors and teammates describe him as an experienced officer with the desire to help his peers whenever possible. Officer Swenson continually produces thorough and complete investigations. As a result of his efforts and hard work, most of his cases are cleared by arrest, complaint, or exhausted of any workable leads.

On June 06, 2023, Officer Swenson responded as backup to a liquor store for a verbal disturbance between two subjects, one of which had a foot long blade. The investigation showed two separate incidents occurred: one being the fight outside the liquor store, and a second being the disturbance inside the liquor store. The disturbance inside the liquor store was resolved on the day of the incident with the arrest of a juvenile for criminal threats against the liquor store clerk and resisting arrest. The fight in the parking lot required additional investigation due to the victim having left prior to police arrival and the inability to review video surveillance at the time. At the conclusion of the call, it was not clear what exactly happened during the incident. Officer Swenson took it upon himself to continue to investigate the second part of the event on his own, even though he was not the assigned officer.

Officer Swenson conducted an extensive follow-up investigation and after reviewing surveillance video days later was able to piece the entire incident together. The result was a thorough and well-written report which set the call for service into motion. Officer Swenson went one step further and authored a Ramey Warrant for the suspect. The quality of this investigation goes far beyond the expectations of a patrol officer and is commendable.

Officer Jesus Garcia

3rd Quarter

Officer Jesse Garica is being recognized as a leader on patrol with an uplifting attitude and positive energy. Still, with over 22 years in this profession, Officer Garcia never hesitates to offer to holdover or come in early to help with staffing.

As a field training officer, Officer Gracia teaches his trainees to always strive to do their best. He takes the time to debrief calls with his trainees and speaks with officers on scene to ensure his trainees understand why certain decisions were made. One such instance in which Officer Garcia's experience was displayed was during a call where he assisted a supervisor in coordinating the response and staging of additional resources. During this same call, since there were sufficient officers on scene, Officer Garcia also took on the role as a Crisis Negotiator (CNT). As CNT, Officer Garca was able to communicate with the suspect who was having a mental health crisis. The suspect was threatening neighbors with a knife and eventually retreated into her apartment. Officer Garca was able to contact the suspect via telephone and eventually get her to exit the residence where she was safely taken into custody. This is just one of many calls for service where Officer Garcia played a vital role.

A supervisor observed Officer Garcia go the extra mile, something that is not out of the ordinary for him. During shift change Officer Garcia brought in food and invited previous supervisors back to say thank you and express his gratitude for working with them.

Jesse, thank you for your effort to continue to promote a positive team environment.

Officer Joshua Hernandez

4th Quarter

Officer Josh Hernandez is being recognized for his contributions to the Department, specifically his work as a patrol officer.

On November 25, 2023, Officer Hernandez was dispatched to a possible burglary where the reporting party indicated the suspect had broken into his vehicle, taken the garage door opener, and then kept going by the residence and was opening their garage door with the stolen opener. Officers arrived on scene and determined that because the vehicle was left unlocked, it was a misdemeanor crime. However, Officer Hernandez reviewed the video surveillance and observed the suspect and his clothing description. Officer Hernandez and other officers located the suspect at a nearby gas station. The suspect was detained and determined to be on active probation for theft-related offenses. A subsequent search of the suspect yielded drugs and drug paraphernalia, as well as an incredible amount of stolen property, credit/debit cards, and mail from several addresses in the immediate neighborhood. Officer Hernandez and fellow officers conducted a meaningful and commendable investigation, which turned the misdemeanor into multiple felonies, and recovered an impressive amount of stolen property.

In addition to Officer Hernandez’s regular patrol duties, he volunteers to work at many community events such as the Central Coast AirFest, Downtown Fridays, and Trunk-or-Treat. Officer Hernandez is also a member of the SWAT Team, a Range Officer, and Field Training Officer. Through each of his collateral assignments, Officer Hernandez gains valuable experience and training which allows him to guide others so they can elevate their skills.

CERTIFICATE OF COMMENDATION

DETECTIVE ZACKARY ROBBINS

Detective (now Sergeant) Zackary Robbins received a Certificate of Commendation for his contributions and outstanding detective work. Det. Robbins is a well-rounded, experienced detective with an impeccable work ethic. He has handled a wide variety of cases throughout the year that should be recognized.

Det. Robbins' assignment to the Violent Crimes Unit includes investigations from felony assaults to homicide. He has established himself as a seasoned, experienced detective with an impeccable reputation. Det. Robbins' expertise is recognized by his supervisors, outside agencies, and the District Attorney's Office.

Det. Robbins completed a homicide investigation, stemming from a 2021 shooting case. His tenacity and thoroughness led to a plea agreement resulting in a 38-year-to-life sentence for the suspect. Det. Robbins also investigated a case involving a 17-year-old suspect who was involved in numerous shootings. Due to the level of violence, the case was transferred to adult court. As a result of Det. Robbins' efforts, the suspect will be held accountable for his actions and removed from our community.

Another great example of Det. Robbins' tenacity was when he successfully sent the District Attorney's Office a cold case homicide from 2018. The volume of information collected was staggering. Det. Robbins ciphered through the volumes of old reports, conducted multiple interviews, wrote numerous search warrants, and did a remarkable job putting the case together. He did this while maintaining his caseload, investigating additional homicide cases, and mentoring new detectives.

Det. Robbins is a great example of an employee that does an outstanding job year-round and is very deserving of this award.

Angela Jorge, Criminalistics Technician II
Darzanae Crite, Criminalistics Technician I

Criminalistics Technicians Angela Jorge and Darzanae Crite received a Certificate of Commendation for their hard work and “can-do” attitude.

On July 7, 2023, officers responded to 1300 S. Bradley regarding the report of a shooting, which resulted in the homicide of a 14-year-old boy. At the time of the incident there was a large gathering of vehicles and people, who left behind a large amount of physical evidence. The Crime Lab was called to respond and process the scene for evidence. Technician Jorge responded to the scene and began processing the large amount of evidence. Technician Crite responded to the hospital and processed a second victim, who survived the shooting, and then responded to the scene to assist Technician Jorge.

Together and separately, they both painstakingly processed a significant amount of physical, DNA, and fingerprint evidence in support of the investigation. Technician Crite continued to support the investigation by monitoring NIBIN leads and notifying detectives of any correlations to other cases. The processing of evidence in this investigation was a huge undertaking, in which they both took with a positive "can-do" attitude.

Angela and Darzanae continue to exhibit a passion for their chosen careers and are an asset to the Santa Maria Police Department. I am appreciative of all their hard work and dedication.

Detective Ruben Peinado

Detective Ruben Peinado received a Certificate of Commendation for his outstanding detective work.

In late July 2023, Det. Peinado was monitoring social media as part of his gang intelligence duties. He came across several posts showing two gang members assaulting a rival gang member. Det. Peinado immediately recognized the two suspects depicted in the social media posts. Det. Peinado began to look further into social media accounts and was able to ascertain the location where the assault occurred. He then obtained surveillance video from the business where the incident occurred. Upon reviewing the video, Det. Peinado saw that one of the gang members held the victim at gunpoint during this assault and stole personal property from the victim. With video evidence of the multiple crimes that took place, Det. Peinado was able to obtain arrest warrants for the two suspects, as well as search warrants for multiple locations.

Det. Peinado organized a successful operation plan for the complex takedown, arrest, and search of the suspects. The results of the arrests and searches were instrumental in enhancing the safety of the community. Not only did Det. Peinado locate the firearm and clothing worn during the robbery and assault, but detectives also found two additional illegal “ghost guns” and thousands of dollars’ worth of illicit fentanyl-laced pills. Over $5,000 in U.S. currency was also seized as evidence of the drug sales operation by the suspects.

Det. Peinado is commended for his tenacity and investigative acumen. This case had a tremendous positive effect on the safety of this community.

LIFESAVING AWARD

This medal and ribbon are awarded for an act of lifesaving in the line of duty, whether or not that attempt was ultimately successful. This award is very special because it exemplifies what our job is all about – coming to the aid of people who need help.

OFFICER JUAN RUBIO

On January 30, 2023, SMPD dispatch received a call for service from a distraught family member reporting that a teenager was unresponsive and "turning purple." Officer Juan Rubio immediately responded as primary officer. Upon arrival he was met by a hysterical family member in the front yard and immediately recognized the need for intervention. Officer Rubio sprinted to the residence and located the teenager on her bed. The teenager was cyanotic, not breathing, and had no detectable pulse. Officer Rubio did not hesitate to initiate cardio-pulmonary resuscitation (CPR). He was able to revive the teen and shifted his focus to directing emergency resources. A short time later, more officers responded for backup. Almost immediately, the teen stopped breathing again.

The reporting party had two doses of Narcan Nasal Spray, which were administered by other officers on scene. It was surmised that the combination of symptoms and the presence of Narcan likely meant the teen was overdosing on opiates. The Narcan had its desired effect, and the teenager began breathing again. Additional emergency personnel arrived, and the teenager was taken to the hospital. She was expected to make a full recovery. Officer Rubio later learned the Narcan was given to the family because the teenager was struggling with opiate addiction and was in treatment.

Officer Rubio acted swiftly during this time-sensitive situation with a calm and controlled demeanor. Without Officer Rubio's immediate actions, the female would have very likely died.

**This is Officer Juan Rubio's second Life Saving award. His first was awarded in 2022.*

Officer Amner Rubio

On July 10, 2023, officers were dispatched to a possible structure fire with an injured person. The call for service stemmed from several male adults playing with fireworks in the backyard of the residence. One of the male adults placed a lit firework in a glass bottle and placed it between his legs. The firework exploded inside the bottle and in turn, the bottle exploded, sending glass shrapnel into his legs.

Santa Maria Police Department personnel receive first aid training regularly which includes the application of tourniquets. However, as a member of the Santa Maria Police Department Special Weapons and Tactics Team (SWAT), Officer Amner Rubio has received extensive additional training on first aid, and tourniquet applications. One of the most important things taught in these trainings is that a human being with an arterial bleed can completely bleed out within 2-5 minutes.

When officers arrived on scene, they located a hallway in the residence covered in blood. Inside that hallway was a male subject suffering from multiple lacerations to his leg. As a result of the lacerations, the male subject was losing a significant amount of blood quickly. Not knowing the extent of injury, however, recognizing it was a serious injury, Officer Rubio acted quickly and efficiently. He placed a tourniquet on the male subject and stopped the loss of blood.

Although this may have been done in repetition in training, having to apply a tourniquet in an actual event, where the victim is likely not holding still and having to deal with a numerous amount of blood, is commendable. The male adult was ultimately transported to the hospital and ultimately recovered from his injuries. Officer Rubio’s quick actions and dedication to training for the worst situations saved this person’s life that night.

Officer Ricardo Arias

On August 23, 2023, officers were dispatched to assist Santa Maria Fire for an “explosion/gas fire.” The Communication Center had multiple callers indicating that the fire was still active. Officer Ricky Arias, along with multiple officers responded. The main fire/explosion was a condominium located on Jackie Lane, a small, gated community with one main entrance into the complex. The powerful explosion left debris scattered across the road and nearby condominiums. Two structures were almost completely destroyed and multiple surrounding condominiums had blown out windows and major structural damage. Two of the condominiums were still on fire and the natural gas had not been turned off.

When Officer Arias arrived on scene, he was given information by nearby witnesses that a woman was possibly trapped inside her residence and needed medical attention. In the middle of this chaotic situation, and the condominium still on fire, Officer Arias, along with firefighters, heroically and selflessly entered the structure to locate the victim. The victim was located, and Officer Arias and the firefighters removed her from the burning condominium. Working together, the victim was carried to the front yard where she was met by the ambulance crew and transported to the hospital with major injuries.

Officer Arias’ heroic efforts, along with Sana Maria Fire, saved this woman’s life.

**This is Officer Ricky Arias’ fourth Life Saving award.*

DISTINGUISHED TEAM AWARD

The Distinguished Team Award is an annual award given to a team of department members for distinguished and outstanding service throughout the calendar year. The award is designed to recognize the performance of a unit that has consistently performed in a superior manner throughout the year, or during an extraordinary single incident and/or major event.

The Distinguished Team Award is a perpetual plaque that will be displayed in the winning unit's assigned working area. The plaque will be retained by the winning team until the next awards luncheon, in which it will be turned over to the newly selected Distinguished Team Award recipients.

DETECTIVE BUREAU

2023 Detective Bureau

- Cmdr. Eligio Lara
- Lt. Daniel Rios
- Sgt. Scott Casey
- Sgt. Trevor Hutton
- Sgt. Todd Logan
- Det. Stephen Best
- Det. Rocio Cazares
- Det. Oscar Corral
- Det. Nathanael Carven
- Det. Erik Hesch
- Det. Kaitlyn McCorkle
- Det. Kevin Ochoa
- Det. Neil Patel
- Det. Ruben Peinado
- Det. Zackary Robbins
- Det. Juan Rubio
- Det. Monique Sandoval
- Det. Brian Santiago
- Det. Eduardo Servin
- Det. Mathew Silver
- Det. Ivan Swenson
- Det. Cole Whitney
- Det. Joshua Yee
- Gina Rush, Digital Forensics Examiner
- Javier Mendez, Investigative Specialist
- Kristina Payne, Investigative Specialist
- Christopher Clement, Investigator

The Detective Bureau has been selected to receive the Police Department's Distinguished Team Award for their distinguished and outstanding service displayed in 2023.

As a team, they have showcased exceptional dedication and commitment to their work and have significantly contributed to the success of the department and the safety of the community. The Detective Bureau is comprised of a team of professionals which includes supervisors, detectives, high-tech crimes investigators, civilian investigative specialists, and a digital forensics examiner.

Efforts in solving complex cases and ensuring justice for victims have not gone unnoticed. The team's collaborative approach, effective communication, and seamless coordination have set a remarkable example for other units within the organization. During the 2023 calendar year, the Detective Bureau made 14 arrests for murder cases, some murders from as far back as 2018. Collectively in 2023, the Bureau referred 759 cases to the District Attorney's Office and had approximately 93 arrests. The team also executed 27 search warrants during 2023.

The Detective Bureau’s ability to complete these investigations and execute search warrants has assisted in the development of most of the other collateral assignments in the department. The SWAT team was able to execute 12 high-risk search warrants and assist on other search warrants because of these efforts. The Unmanned Aerial Systems Team and Crisis Negotiation Team were also used in most of these deployments. The Mobile Field Force Team also assisted in surveillance on many of these investigations. This type of investigation and work has a ripple effect on the department and influences training methods and processes for all these other teams.

The High Technology Crime Investigations unit also received 625 requests for assistance on 356 different cases. Of those requests, 202 were made to process cell phones and four were for computers or hard drives. They also received 51 requests from Detectives to parse data they received from social media companies and handled 335 requests for surveillance videos. Almost every detective carries one or more collateral duty and has managed them well, always putting the Detective Bureau first. The members of the Detective Bureau have consistently demonstrated exceptional investigative skills, attention to detail, and a strong sense of teamwork.

The Santa Maria Police Department is fortunate to have this group of dedicated and energetic employees that make up the Detective Bureau.

SUPPORT EMPLOYEE OF THE YEAR

MICHAEL BALCORTA

Police Business Systems Analyst

The Santa Maria Police Department has grown substantially over the years, as has the department's reliance on innovative crime-solving technologies. The large variety of hardware and software solutions in the past had been managed by staff as a collateral duty. It became clear, there was a need have an expert dedicated to researching, implementing, and maintaining mission critical technology solutions.

In mid-2023, Michael left his position as a Lead Dispatcher to take on the challenge of becoming the Santa Maria Police Department's first Business Systems Analyst. Instead of using technology to dispatch officers to emergencies, Michael now provisions the systems to keep the department running smoothly. In his first six months on the job, Michael not only proved this position was badly needed, but also helped define what the job was going to entail.

Michael is now the system administrator for over 33 software platforms used by department staff. He also managed the research for, or installation and provisioning of, numerous other solutions, including the department's new online reporting platform, FTO training software, online CCW applications, and the creation of the department's new website. Michael's impact was undoubtedly felt the most as he led the department's acquisition, training, administrative setup, workflow creation, troubleshooting, and customer service for the new Axon body worn camera program. This was a massive undertaking. Michael personally trained staff, made sure they were properly equipped, that hardware was accurately inventoried, and worked with vendors to fix shipping errors. Michael identified shortcomings in our processes and equipment and quickly identified and executed fixes.

During 2023, Michael has proven the Police Business Systems Analyst position was desperately needed. He is an exemplary representative of the Santa Maria Police Department and a true professional.

DISPATCHER OF THE YEAR

MEREDITH PIERS
Dispatcher II

Meredith has done an outstanding job year-round for her commitment to keeping high standards in the Dispatch Center. Her commitment is shown through her role as a Communications Training Officer (CTO). Meredith not only imparts her knowledge and skills to new dispatchers, but also serves as a great resource for other Dispatchers. Meredith cares about making sure her co-workers do well.

In addition to Meredith's exemplary work as a CTO, she has also played a pivotal role in promoting the well-being of the department. As a member of the Wellness Committee since its inception in 2022, Meredith consistently attends meetings and takes an active role in coordinating and facilitating all events. Meredith's leadership was shown when she led the successful Secret Santa project, bringing joy and unity to the department.

In June of 2023, Meredith showcased her dedication to her profession by participating in the United States Police & Fire Championships in San Diego. Competing in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, Meredith demonstrated the resilience and skill that defines her character.

Meredith's genuine interest in the well-being of her co-workers and the department is evident in her active involvement in the Wellness Committee. Moreover, she has earned the respect of both peers and supervisors through her teamwork, positive image, and willingness to go above and beyond to support others.

OFFICER OF THE YEAR

Corporal Stephen Best

Corporal Steve Best's work speaks for itself as he works quietly, but tirelessly, behind the scenes on cases ranging from misdemeanor to felony investigations. Although Cpl. Best might not be in the limelight when a major investigation is unraveled, he continually plays a significant role in the solvability of these cases.

The High-Tech Crimes Investigation Unit received 625 electronic evidence processing requests in 2023, with almost half of them being video surveillance retrieval and processing. Daily, Cpl. Best's supervisor has watched him immediately drop the work he is doing, rush out to a business or residence, and capture time sensitive and crucial crime video surveillance. Cpl. Best does this without raising an eyebrow or complaining a word. If Cpl. Best's overflowing workload of video surveillance retrieval and cellular phone downloading wasn't enough, he also took on the role of training and mentoring the department's first civilian Digital Forensic Examiner.

Additionally, Cpl. Best has been almost solely responsible for the communication and coordination with the engineers and programmers for the FLOCK license plate reader system in the city. Cpl. Best routinely communicates with them regarding maintenance of downed or problematic cameras, as well as providing input on camera placement and their fields of view to the engineers. The FLOCK system has provided critical investigative leads since its inception and would not have been entirely possible without Cpl. Best's hard work and attention to detail.

Cpl. Best's work ethic demonstrates his commitment to serving the department and public with excellence. He represents the Santa Maria Police Department in a positive and professional manner and takes pride in his job. We are lucky to have him.